Check List the journal of biodiversity data

NOTES ON GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION

Check List 16 (3): 781–784
https://doi.org/10.15560/16.3.781

PENSOFT

First record of Western Gull, *Larus occidentalis* Audubon, 1839 (Charadriiformes, Laridae), for Honduras

John van Dort

Centro Zamorano de Biodiversidad, Universidad Zamorano, Carretera a Danlí km 30, Francisco Morazán, Honduras; john.vandort@gmail.com

Abstract

I present the first record for Honduras of Western Gull, *Larus occidentalis* Audubon, 1839, a species found on the Pacific coast of southern Canada, the United States and northern Mexico. An adult was present for at least two weeks at an estuary in the Gulf of Fonseca in southern Honduras. This observation represents the third record of this species for Central America.

Keywords

Central America, Choluteca, Gulf Fonseca, new avian record.

Academic editor: Caio J. Carlos | Received 11 May 2020 | Accepted 12 June 2020 | Published 26 June 2020

Citation: van Dort J (2020) First record of Western Gull, *Larus occidentalis* Audubon, 1839 (Charadriiformes, Laridae), for Honduras. Check List 16 (3): 781–784. https://doi.org/10.15560/16.3.781

Introduction

Gulls (Charadriiformes: Laridae) are well-known for wandering far outside their regular ranges, and recent advances in gull identification and increased observer coverage have led to better documentation of this group's propensity for vagrancy. Western Gull, *Larus occidentalis* Audubon, 1839, is a large white-headed gull from the Pacific coast of southern Canada, the United States and northern Mexico, which breeds from southern Washington to central Baja California (Pierotti and Annett 2020; Fig. 1). Since 2001, a few pairs have bred in northern Sinaloa, Mexico (González-Bernal et al. 2003). It is mainly sedentary, but some post-breeding dispersal takes place north and south of the breeding range, mostly by juveniles and immatures (Coulter 1975; Spear 1988; Malling Olsen and Larsson 2003). Two subspecies are currently recognized: the nominate *L. occidentalis occidentalis* north from Monterrey Peninsula, and the darker-backed *L. occidentalis wymani* Dickey & van Rossem, 1925 south from there (Malling Olsen and Larsson 2003). *L. occidentalis occidentalis* hybridizes extensively with Glaucous-winged, Gull *L. glaucescens* Naumann, 1840, in the northern half of its distribution (Hoffman et al. 1978). The *L. occidentalis wymani* race is regular in Mexico south to central Baja California. Here, I document the first record of Western Gull for Honduras and the third record for Central America (Obando-Calderón et al. 2014; Ovando 2016).

Methods

On 4 January 2018, Alfonso Auerbach and I visited the Las Aguas estuary at the mouth of the Sampile river in the department of Choluteca, Honduras. The Las Aguas estuary, also known as the El Pedregal estuary,

©The author. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

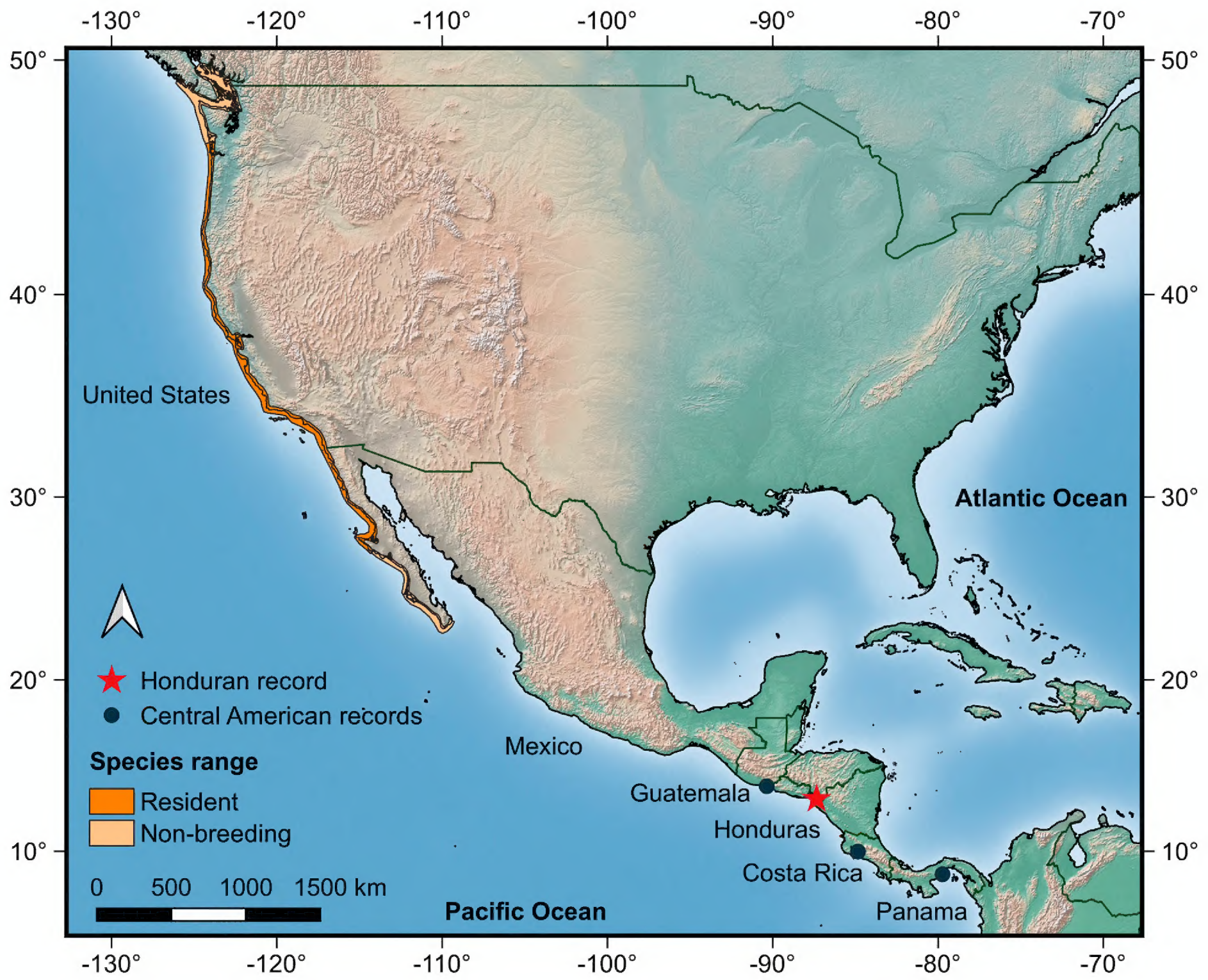

Figure 1. Resident and non-breeding range of Western Gull, *Larus occidentalis*, and all Central American records.

is a shallow intertidal mudflat (<2 m water depth at high tide) surrounded by mature mangrove forest (*Rhizophora mangle* Linnaeus, 1753). It is situated in the eastern part of the Gulf of Fonseca, a shallow bay on the Pacific coast of northern Central America shared by El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua (Fig. 1). We made our observations between 12:20 h and 14:20 h over the course of an 8 km transect to count the birds present at this site.

I visited the site again on 19 Jan 2018 between 11:45 h and 14:35 h over the course of a 14 km transect to collect data for the Central American Waterbird Census, a sister program of Wetlands International's International Waterbird Census, and for the Migratory Shorebird Project, a 10-year study of wintering shorebirds along the Pacific coast of the Americas. Both visits were made using a small fishing boat on a rising tide, when waterbirds concentrate on the banks of estuary.

The map was prepared using NaturalEarth raster in QGIS 3.10.4 (QGIS 2020). The distributional data was obtained from the BirdLife database (BirdLife 2019).

Results

***Larus occidentalis* Audubon, 1839**
Figures 1, 2

New record. Honduras • Choluteca; Marcovia, Las Aguas estuary; 13°05.71′N, –87°21.37′W; 0 m a.s.l.; 4 Jan. 2018; John van Dort.

On 4 January 2018, I observed a large white-headed gull on mudflats at the Las Aguas estuary in Choluteca, Honduras (Fig. 1).

Identification. I identified the individual as an adult Western Gull based on the following characters: broad yellow bulbous-tipped bill with whitish tip and orange-red gonys spot; white head and underparts; straw-colored eye with yellow orbital ring; dark gray mantle; and pale pinkish cream legs (Malling Olsen and Larsson 2003; Howell and Dunn 2007). The bird was in adult plumage, i.e. with white head and underparts, showing abraded white tips on the outer primaries (Fig. 2).

This species is similar to Yellow-footed Gull, *L. livens* Dwight, 1919, and until 1982 the two were considered conspecific (AOU 1982); however, the adult of Yellow-footed Gull has yellow legs and feet. Also similar is Slaty-backed Gull, *L. schistisagus* Stejneger, 1884, from the northern Pacific, but in that species, the head is rounder, the orbital ring is red, the bill is paler and less bulbous, the legs are brighter pink, and the topside of the outer wing shows white markings like a 'string

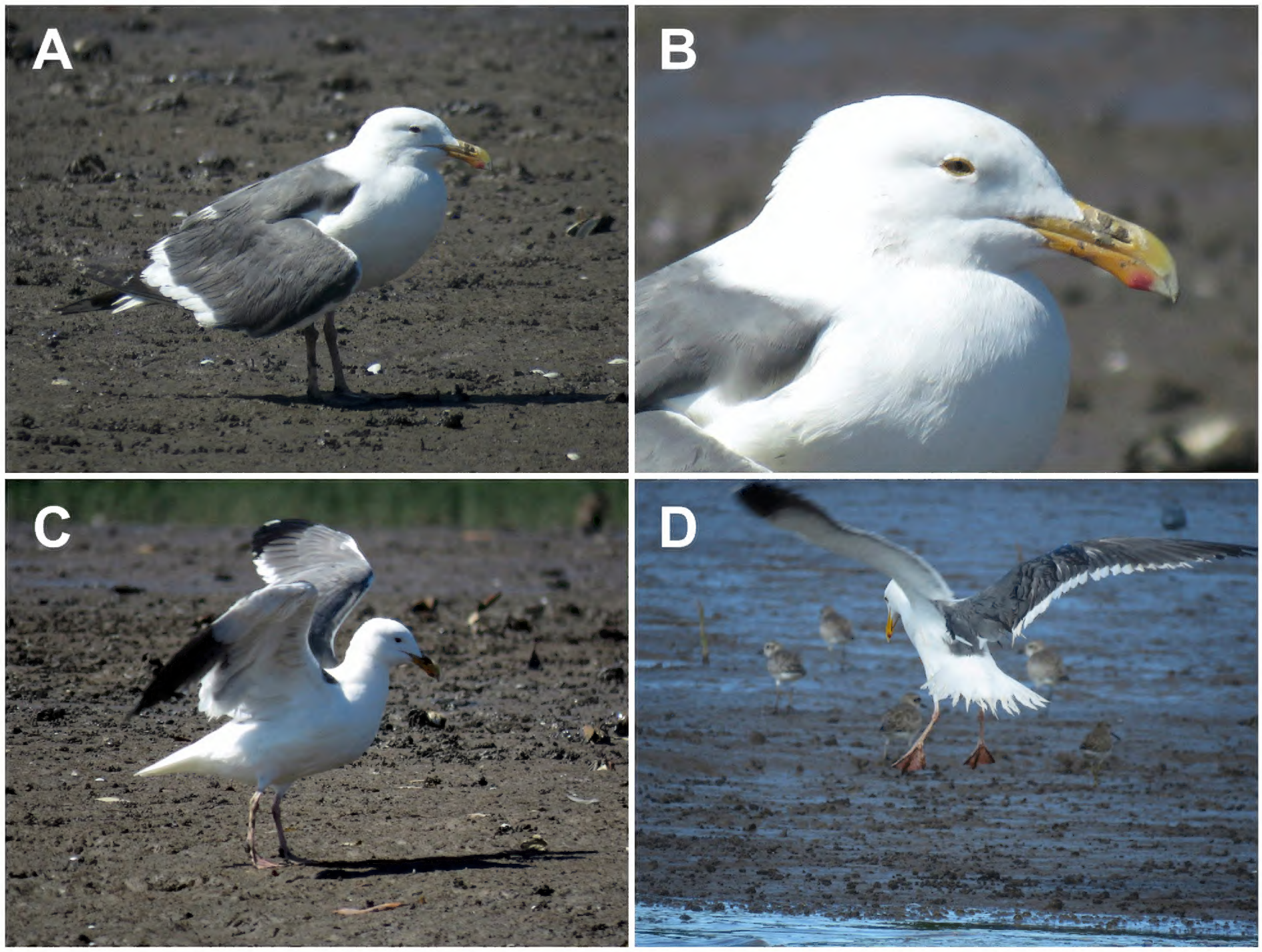

Figure 2. Adult Western Gull, *Larus occidentalis,* at the Las Aguas estuary in Choluteca, Honduras; photos taken 4 Jan. 2018 (**A–C**) and 19 Jan. 2018 (**D**). **A.** Lateral view. **B.** Detail of head, showing straw-colored iris and yellow orbital ring. **C.** Lateral view, open wing shot showing a pattern of black markings on fifth primary suggestive of the nominate subspecies. **D.** Posterior view, open wing shot.

of pearls'. A southern hemisphere species, Kelp Gull *L. dominicanus* Lichtenstein, 1823, is much darker-backed, lacking contrast between mantle and wing tip, and has olive-yellow legs and feet. Hybrids of *L. dominicanus* with American Herring Gull, *L. smithsonianus* Coues, 1862, and its F1 backcrosses, have yellow or greenish yellow legs and a red orbital ring (Dittmann and Cardiff 2005), as does the sleeker, thinner-billed Lesser Black-backed Gull, *L. fuscus* Linnaeus, 1758.

I hesitate to assign my identification to subspecies, but note that the mantle appeared relatively pale, i.e. more conform with the northern nominate race *L. occidentalis occidentalis*, although bleaching from stronger sunlight at tropical latitudes may have affected the plumage. Some authors note a difference in the color of the irides, with *L. occidentalis wymani* usually showing a paler eye (McCaskie 1983; Malling Olsen and Larsson 2003; Pierotti and Annett 2020), although others warn there is much individual variation from lemon whitish to dull olive in both subspecies (Howell and Dunn 2007). A supporting character for *L. occidentalis occidentalis* over *L. occidentalis wymani* is the size and shape of the black markings in the tip of the fifth primary, which in this individual appear to be reduced (Fig. 2).

On 4 Jan 2019, the individual appeared injured and was dragging the right wing as it walked. I encountered what was presumably the same individual at the same location on 19 Jan 2018, when it appeared in better condition: the right wing was now seen hanging down only occasionally, and the bird was seen to make short flights. The site was not visited again until 12 May 2018, when the bird was not detected.

Discussion

Comparing the current observation to published Honduran avifauna lists (Monroe 1968; Anderson and Bonta 2002; Gallardo 2014; Mejía and Alberto 2015; Fagan and Komar 2016), this observation represents the first record for Western Gull in Honduras. Western Gull is largely sedentary in its range, and its movements are dispersive rather than migratory (Coulter 1975). Like many of its congeners, it is prone to vagrancy, with scattered inland records from Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Saskatchewan, Texas and Utah (eBird 2020), as well as an Atlantic Ocean record from New York (Burgiel et al. 2006). The species is casual south to Oaxaca (Howell and Dunn 2007). It is a vagrant to Hawaii (Howell and Dunn 2007), Costa Rica (Obando-Calderón et al. 2014), Guatemala (Ovando 2016), and

Panama (Raab 2019). Within its normal range, the species is mostly coastal, and found at harbors, beaches and river mouths; it ranges a short distance (<50 km) inland to garbage dumps, reservoirs and lakes (Howell and Dunn 2007). Previous records from Guatemala and Costa Rica are from coastal sites as well (Obando-Calderón et al. 2014; Ovando 2016).

As in several other non-migratory larids, adult Western Gulls have been shown to stay close to their natal grounds while juveniles and immatures disperse further, although rarely more than 600 km (Coulter 1975; Spear 1988). However, all Central American records thus far have been of adults. The first Central American record dates back to 2014, when an adult was present at Caldera, Puntarenas, Costa Rica (Obrando-Calderón et al. 2014), followed by a 2016 Guatemalan record of an adult at El Dormido, Santa Rosa (though initially identified as a Lesser Black-backed Gull; Ovando 2016). The Honduran record from the Gulf of Fonseca is the third record for the region, while an adult present in Punta Chame in central Panama between 19 November 2019 and 8 March 2020 represents the fourth record (Raab 2019). A week after the Panama bird was last seen, an adult—potentially the same individual—was found in Puntarenas, Costa Rica, about 580 km northwest, in the same general area where the 2014 bird was seen (Umana 2020). This individual stayed until early May (Campos 2020). Whether these recent vagrant records in the tropical Pacific are simply a product of increased identification knowledge and observer coverage or the result of a southward expansion trend that thus far has produced breeding records for the Mexican state of Sinaloa, remains to be seen.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank the US Forest Service and Manomet, Inc. for financial support of field work; Alfonso Auerbach for field assistance; and Oliver Komar and an anonymous reviewer for helpful comments on an earlier version of this note. A special thank you to Roselvy Juárez for helpful comments on the manuscript and for creating the map.

References

American Ornithologists' Union Committee on Classification and Nomenclature (1982) Thirty-fourth supplement to the American Ornithologists' Union check-list of North American birds. Supplement to Auk 99 (3): 1CC–16CC. https://doi.org/10.2307/4085886

Anderson DL, Bonta M (2002) Birding Honduras: A Checklist and Guide. EcoArte S. de R.L., Tegucigalpa, 186 pp.

Audubon JJ (1839) Ornithological biography, or an account of the habits of the birds of the United States of America; accompanied by descriptions of the objects represented in the work entitled The Birds of America, and interspersed with delineations of American scenery and manners. Adam Black, Edinburgh, xxxix + 512 pp. https://doi.org/10.5962/bhl.title.48976

BirdLife International and Handbook of the Birds of the World (2019) Species distribution data request. Version 2019.1 http://datazone.birdlife.org/species/requestdis. Accessed on: 2020-6-6.

Burgiel JC, Paxton RO, Veit RR (2006) Hudson-Delaware. North American Birds 60 (2): 208–211.

Campos V (2020) eBird Checklist: https://ebird.org/checklist/S68408894. Accessed on: 2020-6-5.

Coulter M (1975) Post-breeding movements and mortality in the Western Gull, *Larus occidentalis*. Condor 77 (3): 243–249. https://doi.org/10.2307/1366220

Dittmann DL, Cardiff SW (2005) Origins and identification of Kelp × Herring Gull hybrids: The "Chandeleur" Gull. Birding 37: 266–276.

eBird (2020) eBird: An online database of bird distribution and abundance. eBird, Ithaca, New York. https://www.ebird.org. Accessed on: 2020-5-7.

Fagan J, Komar O (2016) Peterson field guide to birds of northern Central America. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Boston and New York, 448 pp.

Gallardo RJ (2014) Guide to the birds of Honduras. Mountain Gem Tours, Tegucigalpa, 555 pp.

González-Bernal MA, Vega X, Mellink E (2003) Nesting of Western Gulls in Bahía de Santa María-La Reforma, Sinaloa, Mexico. Western Birds 34: 175–177.

Hoffman W, Wiens JA, Scott, JM (1978) Hybridization between gulls (*Larus glaucescens* and *L. occidentalis*) in the Pacific Northwest. The Auk 95 (3): 441–458. https://doi.org/10.1093/auk/95.3.441

Howell SNG, Dunn J (2007) A reference guide to the gulls of the Americas. Houghton Mifflin Company, New York, 528 pp.

Malling Olsen K, Larsson H (2003) Gulls of North America, Europe, and Asia. Princeton University Press, Princeton, 544 pp.

McCaskie G (1983) Another look at the Western and Yellow-Footed Gulls. Western Birds 14 (2): 85–107.

Mejía MM, Alberto CAZ (2015) Honduras Birding Paradise Checklist. Asociación Hondureña de Ornitología, Tegucigalpa, 66 pp.

Monroe BL Jr (1968) A distributional survey of the birds of Honduras. Ornithological Monographs 7: 1–458. https://doi.org/10.2307/40168043

Obando-Calderón G, Camacho-Varela P, Chaves-Campos J, Garrigues R, Montoya M, Ramírez-Alán O, Zook J (2014) Lista oficial de las aves de Costa Rica. Actualización 2014. Zeledonia 18 (2): 33–50.

Ovando M (2016) eBird Checklist: https://ebird.org/checklist/S32046100. Accessed on: 2020-6-5.

Pierotti RJ, Annett CA (2020) Western Gull (*Larus occidentalis*), version 1.0. In Birds of the World (AF Poole and FB Gill, Editors). Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Ithaca, NY, USA. https://doi.org/10.2173/bow.wesgul.01

QGIS Development Team (2020) QGIS Geographic Information System (version 3.10.4). Open Source Geospatial Foundation Project. http://qgis.osgeo.org. Accessed on: 2020-5-3.

Raab A (2019) eBird Checklist: https://ebird.org/canada/checklist/S61586091. Accessed on: 2020-6-5.

Spear, LB (1988) Dispersal patterns of Western Gulls from southeast Farallon Island. The Auk 105: 128–141.

Umana M (2020) eBird Checklist: https://ebird.org/checklist/S65841313. Accessed on: 2020-6-5.